CHAPTER XXII

THE ORIGINS OF THE FRANCO-PRUSSIAN WAR AND THE REMAKING OF GERMANY

For many years the legend flourished that Bismarck, by a masterly *coup*, tricked France into declaring war on Prussia in July 1870. No one was more assiduous in fostering this story than Bismarck himself, in moods of mischief or vainglory; many historians found evidence to support him, and carried the tale of his deceit of the French back several years before 1870. The truth is far more complicated. Bismarck certainly bears his share of responsibility for the outbreak of war, but cannot claim the whole of it; the question even of when he began to desire war remains obscure, as does the question of exactly what results he hoped would follow from it.

Among its other results one, the shift in Europe's diplomatic centre of gravity from Paris to Berlin, had been among his few long-term objectives from the start of his career in office in 1862. He had always meant, if he could, to turn Berlin into the directing centre of a Europe controlled by a Prussianised Germany. The events of the rest of the 'sixties were dominated by his determination to remake Germany on terms of his own choosing. This determination soon became evident, and the four powers strong enough to stand up to Prussia had to decide what to do about it. Great Britain and Russia were, for divers reasons, indifferent. The British deliberately pursued a policy of isolation. The Russians, emerging from the retirement in which they had been plunged by the Crimean War (ch. x, pp. 268–9), found themselves rivals with Austria in south-east Europe, and therefore looked more with favour than otherwise on any distraction to be provided for the Habsburgs in Germany. Austria's active hostility was defeated, as the last chapters have shown. France, too, was hostile: but no opportunity for French intervention in the German civil war was found, and the victors of Königgrätz (which the French called Sadowa) could not be challenged lightly.

During the next four years the struggle for control of German unity took on something of the character of a duel between Bismarck and Napoleon III, and one profound and simple difference between them must be noted from the start: Napoleon did not know his own mind, and Bismarck did. Napoleon hesitated perpetually, like Buridan's ass (the comparison is borrowed from Eyck's *Bismarck*), between dynastic, religious, and military advantages, between advantages in foreign and advantages in internal policy; he suffered from too fertile a political imagination, and

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too often pursued incompatibles. Many accounts of his activities suppose that he pursued one aim consistently at a time: this was not so. But Bismarck started, like a successful general, by defining his object: a limited Germany unified under the control of the Prussian ruling class in which he had been born. He saw all the potential advantages which perplexed Napoleon in regular proportion to each other and to his object, and did not try to secure too many at once.

Both in France and in Prussia there was a strong 'militarist' group, close to the throne, of professional soldiers anxious to exercise their profession; in both countries a system of conscription had habituated a large number of men to the use of arms (see ch. XII, p. 312); the pacifist sentiments which could get some slight hearing in Cobden's England were of little importance in France and of none in Prussia. After the wars of 1859 and 1866 each country was confident of its own prowess, and ready one day to accept a war with the other. The name of Napoleon had created much glory for France, but the nephew had not the genius in the field, nor the powers of leadership, nor the strength of character, of the uncle; and Bismarck proved more successful both in holding the soldiers in check at moments politically inapt for war, and in providing them with the victory they sought.

On the day after the disaster of Königgrätz Francis Joseph ceded Venetia to Napoleon by telegraph, and asked him to arrange an armistice. The emperor of the French was surprised by the Austrian collapse; he seems to have expected the Austrians to win the war, and at all events had taken no steps to hedge against the Prussian victory that now confronted him. He had not mobilised his army; and now that some of his ministers pressed him to do so, while Austria's army was still on a war footing, he found there was no time left to do so usefully. Besides, he was ill; and the splendid opportunity that for a moment seemed to lie under his hand slipped by. It took him ten days to compile proposals, markedly favourable to Francis Joseph; but Bismarck accepted them readily, for he had no wish to trample on Austria—he only wanted to get her out of the way of Prussian power (preliminaries of Nikolsburg, 26 July, and peace treaty of Prague, 23 August 1866). Venetia was to pass to defeated Italy, though this was a loss more in prestige than in strength: some contemporaries saw that it was really to Austria's advantage to surrender this hostile population. To victorious Prussia Austria had to cede no territory at all, and had only to pay a small cash indemnity; and though she left the superseded Germanic Confederation, the North German Confederation (*Norddeutscher Bund*) that was to succeed it was to be restricted mainly to Protestant states, and not to extend south of the River Main.

Bismarck was chiefly occupied, till June of the following year, in settling the new Confederation's constitution. North of the Main he

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arranged that Prussia should recoup herself by much severer terms for Austria's German allies, several of which were absorbed into the Prussian state by frontier revisions that added four-and-a-half millions to Prussia's population and gave her for the first time one continuous boundary from the Meuse to the Memel. One of the vanished states, Hanover, provided Prussia with abundant secret-service money for a generation to come, while the knotty political problem of the demarcation between its former ruler's private and public fortunes remained unsolved.

In a preliminary tussle with the Prussian parliament, Bismarck secured a significant tactical success. The opposition which the Progressive party had maintained to his unconstitutional action, more than thirty months before, in making war on Denmark without parliamentary financial sanction was suddenly deprived of support by a public opinion which greeted with enthusiasm the victory over Austria. The liberal majority in the new parliament, elected on the day of Königgrätz, dared not risk another dissolution which would have swept it away; and on 3 September 1866 a bill of indemnity for the illegal spending on the Danish war was voted by a majority of over three to one. The vote, cast with the glories of the immediate past in mind, was heavy with consequences for the future: it marked the defeat of liberalism in Germany, for it provided a convenient precedent to which later governments could appeal, and so secured the independence of the executive from parliamentary control.

Bismarck further weakened his parliamentary enemies by devising for the new Confederation an executive branch with real administrative powers, which the old had never had. A lower house (*Reichstag*) was to be elected by universal suffrage—an arrangement that even the Westminster parliament had just feared to make—but its powers were advisory only, not even including the power of the purse that Prussian experience had just shown to be ineffective, except for some control over the size of the army; and the peasant mass of the electorate was soundly conservative. The new Confederation had the king of Prussia for its President; and the predominance in it of Prussia was secured by an ingenious trick. To the four Prussian votes in the upper chamber of the old Confederation were added the thirteen votes which had belonged to the states newly declared part of Prussia; and fourteen votes in the new upper house (*Bundesrat*) were to be enough to reject any constitutional amendment.

Throughout the constitutional discussions and debates, private and public alike, Bismarck had the unintended assistance of Napoleon III, who played the part of bogey-man to Bismarck's entire satisfaction, whenever the spectre of a foreign danger to German soil was called for. Napoleon had proposed the Main frontier to ensure that the German states remained divided. He envisaged three German groupings, one centred on Prussia, and one on Austria; the third and weakest, the four states bounded by the Main, the Rhine, Austria, and Bohemia, would,

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he hoped, look to himself for guidance. To these four states the Treaty of Prague promised an independent international existence, but even before it was signed Bismarck had persuaded them secretly to sign away part of their independence.

An increase in Prussian strength necessarily required, in the eyes of French public opinion and by the practice of French diplomacy, an increase in French strength also. To secure this Napoleon had sent Benedetti (1817–1900), his shrewd Corsican ambassador at Berlin, down to see Bismarck in the field to demand extensions of French territory in the Palatinate, at the expense of Bavaria, Luxemburg, and Prussia herself. Bismarck was short with Benedetti; but managed to extract from the ambassador (after both had returned to Berlin) a draft treaty in Benedetti's own hand, containing fresh proposals under which France would take Belgium and Luxemburg, in return agreeing to the union of all Germany but Austria and an offensive and defensive Franco-German alliance. Of this project, put forward on Napoleon's instructions, Bismarck made spectacular use four years later: it appeared, undated, in *The Times* of 25 July 1870. More immediately, he was able to denounce the various Napoleonic designs to the south-German diplomats in his capital. Convinced of France's bad faith, Württemberg, Baden, and Bavaria made secret treaties with Prussia in mid-August by which they entrusted their armies to Prussian command in the event of a Franco-Prussian war.

Napoleon could find no support in Europe for his plans to expand. Austria was helpless, Prussia hostile, Russia aloof; England, in the throes of a change of government, expressed her usual anxieties for Belgium; Italy, aggrieved by the way in which Venetia came to her, had no wish to offer him her weak support. He had to suffer the humiliation of withdrawing his demands unmet; but he did not forget them. For the rest of his reign one of the dominating influences on his foreign policy was this unassuaged desire to compensate France for Prussia's gains.

From this time onward peace was insecure. Napoleon convinced himself, or was convinced by his more hectic advisers, that he could not afford to see a unified Germany, and must be ready to fight to prevent one from coming into existence. He parted at once with his Foreign Minister, Drouyn de Lhuys, who now regarded German unity as inevitable and was not sorry to go: 'I have seen two dynasties fall', he said to Goltz, the North German envoy, 'and I know the signs.'[1] Just as a man running dares not stop suddenly, lest he lose his balance and fall, Napoleon could retain his balance at home only if he ran from victory to victory abroad. His Mexican venture was already a defeat: he withdrew the last of his troops, under pressure from the United States, in March 1867.

Simultaneously, he tried to make friends with Russia, but bungled the

[1] H. Oncken, *Die Rheinpolitik Kaiser Napoleons III*... (Stuttgart, 1926), vol. II, p. 41.

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negotiation. Russia wanted France's support in the Levant, where a Cretan revolt seemed to offer a chance of reopening the eastern question; but France's current eastern interests were commercial rather than political, and Russia could not be persuaded to take a suitable interest in Rhineland problems. Napoleon needed to find some triumph that would strike the imagination of his subjects, and show them that he protected French interests by securing a due equivalent for Prussia's new gains. Early in 1867, during his talks with Russia, he seemed to find what he was looking for when he revived his proposal to obtain Luxemburg.

For fifty years the city of Luxemburg had contained a Prussian garrison, as a fortress of the Germanic Confederation, intended with several others to hinder a French advance into central Europe. The new North German Confederation did not include Luxemburg: therefore, it could be argued, the garrison ought to go. Moreover, William III of the Netherlands, owner of the grand duchy of Luxemburg, which the creation of Belgium had separated from the rest of his kingdom, was short of money. In March 1867 Napoleon agreed with him secretly to buy the grand duchy outright, for cash down; having previously, as he thought, arranged with Bismarck that there would be no Prussian objection. But the secret was not well enough kept, and when it leaked out the German press—with Bismarck's connivance—protested strongly against the proposed transfer. Bismarck chose this moment to publish the secret treaties which he had made with the south German states in the previous August.

Napoleon suddenly found himself faced with the prospect of having to pay for Luxemburg, if he wanted it, with men as well as money; and he could no more easily find allies to help him to get it than he had been able to find them the year before. True, Bismarck was equally unsuccessful in creating an alliance to work against him: the inexperienced but stolid British Foreign Secretary, Stanley (1826–93), refused to be frightened by Prussian hints that Napoleon really cherished designs on Belgium, and the Austrian Foreign Minister Beust (1809–86), a recent recruit to Habsburg service from Saxony, tartly rejected Bismarck's professions of amity. With some German patriotism, he also refused an offer of alliance from Napoleon, since it envisaged a war against Prussia that would not appeal to the Germans in Austria. He put forward an idea of his own, that Luxemburg should be handed over to Belgium and that France should receive instead two Belgian fortresses surrendered in 1815: a proposal detested in Brussels and peremptorily forbidden in London. France and Prussia embarked on various precautionary measures preliminary to mobilisation. But the resources of diplomacy were not yet exhausted; nor were the leaders on either side yet determined on a war. Bismarck thought —or so he said in an expansive moment four years later—that Prussia by herself was probably not strong enough to defeat France in single combat, and that the cement of her alliances with the south German

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states had not yet set. He was able to suggest to Napoleon through the Prussian ambassador in Paris, who had the ear of the empress, that the question of a Luxemburg straw was not worth debating in arms.

Advantage was taken of a friendly and disinterested suggestion by the tsar to summon a conference of the European powers' representatives in London. As with most successful nineteenth-century conferences, previous concert between the disputants settled what it was to decide. Napoleon, appreciating that he was isolated, and unwilling to bring on a war, changed his tune: instead of baying for compensations, he chanted for a while praise of peace and France's reverence for international engagements; and his minister Rouher arranged with Goltz what the settlement was to be. The Prussian garrison was to leave Luxemburg, the fortress was to be dismantled, and the grand duchy was to be guaranteed neutral by the powers. Thanks to Prussian pressure on Stanley, these provisions were included in the Treaty of London which concluded the short conference on 11 May 1867.

Soon afterwards a curious interpretation of the phrase 'collective guarantee' in this treaty was put before the Westminster parliament by Stanley and by his father and Prime Minister, Derby. Their doctrine appeared to mean that if any guaranteeing power invaded the guaranteed territory, none of the co-guarantors would be called on to take any action in its defence: a puzzle for lawyers. Otherwise the incident served its turn in English politics, by strengthening a minority government in some awkward debates over parliamentary reform, and in Prussian by hastening the conclusion of the north-German constitutional debate. The French rejoiced that the garrison was to go, and the Germans were glad to have kept the French from succeeding to it. (Indeed Bismarck, not wishing at the moment to exacerbate the French further, fended off in September a request from Baden to join the new Confederation.) An exhibition at Paris provided a more attractive scene for the conduct of international relations than a green table in Downing Street. But the tsar, who came to see it with many other royalties—including the king of Prussia—was shot at by a young Pole; and the gaieties were still more effectively spoiled by the news which reached Europe at the end of June. The Mexican affair was over: Maximilian had been executed at Queretaro (cf. chs. XXIV and XXV, pp. 641, 677–8).

Two months later Napoleon and Eugénie paid a visit of condolence to Francis Joseph at Salzburg. On his way there Napoleon remarked, almost casually, at Munich railway station that if the south German states were to join Bismarck's new Confederation in a way that angered France, he would have to go to war with them. The Austrian emperor was attended by several of his ministers; the emperor of the French relied on his own sagacity. Neither advice nor inspiration produced any definite compact; and Napoleon was left with the hope that his engaging manners had

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made some impression on the man whose empire he had so often, in the past eight years, attacked. For three years more he followed the mirage of the Austrian alliance: yet it may be doubted whether Francis Joseph was ever ready to come to terms with the man but for whom his brother would not have stood before a firing squad.

One of the inducements to Napoleon to ally himself with the Habsburg monarchy was that Austria-Hungary was predominantly Catholic; the alliance would therefore be popular with Catholics in France. On the other hand, to pursue a consistently Catholic policy would necessarily put him at odds with Italy, whose only remaining national ambition was to secure what territory round Rome still remained in the temporal power of the pope. Having failed to ingratiate himself with the Italians by the present of Venetia in July 1866, Napoleon at least withdrew that December the French garrison at Rome. The Italian government was emboldened in consequence to wink at, or even to encourage, revolutionary raids on the papal enclave; by the end of September 1867 these raids had attained strength formidable enough to alarm the pope, the more so as Garibaldi appeared on the spot to lead them.

This faced Napoleon with a difficult decision, the more difficult because his advisers were so much divided. He could support the Italian claims to papal territory, and thus both secure an ally that he believed to be of weight, and complete the part that he had played ever since the Plombières meeting as patron of united Italy. But to do this he would have to combine with anti-clerical and revolutionary forces: which he dared not do. His own regime depended too much on the violent repression of unrest and on the loyalty of Catholics. To Catholics—and his wife was an ardent Catholic—there could be no question of France's duty: it must be to support the pope, whatever the cost. In the end, Napoleon preferred the ally at home to the ally abroad, and let a small French expeditionary force sail for the Tiber; although characteristically he hesitated even beyond the last minute, trying to recall it by semaphore just as it was leaving French territorial waters.

It arrived in the nick of time to help defeat the Garibaldini at Mentana, only a dozen miles from Rome, on 3 November: a check that the Italians were reluctant to forgive. Nor did they find acceptable Rouher's pronouncement in the French parliament a few days later, that imperial France would never allow the new Italian kingdom to possess itself of Rome.

Secretly, Napoleon continued to coax Francis Joseph, hoping to expand the understanding to which he fancied they had come at Salzburg into a fully fledged alliance; and this policy eventually brought him up against the consequences of having replaced his garrison in Rome. The talks with Austria-Hungary were at first very secret: Napoleon's own ambassador in Vienna, Gramont, knew nothing of them till he became Foreign

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Minister in 1870. Francis Joseph displayed his usual perfect manners, but courtesy concealed a reluctance to commit himself. Beust would not accept Napoleon's renewed proposal for an active alliance aimed at Prussia; not only because it was unacceptable to the German-speaking half of the monarchy, but because some of the leading Magyars, whose position had just been strengthened by the *Ausgleich* (cf. ch. xx), were positively hostile to France. Napoleon would not accept Beust's innocent-seeming counter-proposal, that the two powers should take no diplomatic action without previous accord, since that might deprive him of his initiative. Austria, in fact, felt too weak to move alone, and on her proposition Italy was brought in to make a third; and this brought the negotiation to a standstill after a year. If Austria would not stir without Italy, Italy would not stir without having Rome; and Austria supported her in this—fearing that Prussia might offer Italy, as the price of an alliance, not only Rome but also the Trentino. Now Rome, as we have seen, was not something that Eugénie's husband was prepared to give up. Eventually, in September 1869, there was an exchange of letters between Napoleon and Francis Joseph, and Napoleon and Victor Emmanuel. The Austrian and Italian monarchs assured the emperor of the French, in the warmest terms, of their affection for him and of their determination to come to his aid in war; but this in personal letters, not in formal diplomatic documents. Napoleon placed a pathetic trust in these worthless assurances. 'He made his preparations languidly,' said Acton, 'like a man in whom pain has extinguished resolution and activity and hopefulness, and took so much time that he never concluded.'[1]

All through these ineffectual negotiations the French army authorities were trying to improve their forces, and to meet the doubts which had crept into their minds since Sadowa about whether theirs still was the best army in the world. Napoleon took a keen interest in problems of army organisation and armament. Niel (1802–69), who had been promoted marshal on the field of Solferino, became his Minister of War early in 1867, and took charge of a large reform. After prolonged preparation, a law was passed in January 1868 which extended the length of conscript service from seven years to nine, the last four of these in reserve. The transfer from the old system to the new was still in progress when war broke out in 1870; nor was the new as effective as its founders had hoped—partly because of changes made during its passage through parliament, where many deputies were anxious to reduce military spending. But at least Niel saw before he died the whole army equipped with a good breech-loading rifle, named after its inventor Chassepot (cf. ch. xii, p. 305). Some early models of the Chassepot had 'worked wonders' (*ont fait merveille*) at Mentana, according to a dispatch from the French commander there, conspicuously lacking in tact, which was published to annoy

[1] Acton MS. 4928, f. 108.

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the Prussians and succeeded in wounding the Italians. Outside France Niel's reforms were thought to be important. In northern Germany army reform went on also, with less opposition and more efficiency: the armies of the rest of the new confederation were assimilated as far as could be to Prussia's.

During these changes, neither France nor Prussia wanted to fight; the French because they were not ready, and the Prussians because each year's postponement of the war would add 100,000 trained soldiers to their army. Yet the French gave the impression to the rest of Europe that they were *mauvais coucheurs*, dissatisfied with their surroundings. For example, in the winter of 1868–9 a French railway company—in debt to the French government—tried to buy two Belgian ones. The Belgians took fright, and in February passed a law forbidding Belgian railways to sell their lines to foreigners. The French government at once took umbrage—so sharply indeed as to create a presumption that it had been privy to the deal from the start, and having failed to secure a political advance towards the lower Rhine was now seeking an economic one. A firm protest from Clarendon, who had again become the British Foreign Secretary in December, brought the scare to an abrupt close.

After the war, some Frenchmen said that they had sensed it coming; that the atmosphere was heavy with menace. In fact, this would have been more true of the spring of 1869 than of 1870.

On the second day of 1870 the Ollivier ministry was formed in France, with Clarendon's friend Daru as Foreign Minister (cf. ch. IV, p. 97). Ollivier was known to be a supporter of German unity; and one of Daru's first acts was to demand, with success, that Napoleon should cease another of his secret negotiations, in which he had engaged after the September exchange of letters on the projected triple alliance. He had sent Fleury, one of his military entourage, as ambassador to St Petersburg; while holding the putative triple alliance in play, he had launched inquiries about the price that Russia would charge for becoming his ally instead. As soon as Fleury's activities were curtailed, Daru embarked on an equally secret project, equally devoid of result. He got Clarendon to take up with Bismarck, as if from himself and not from Daru, the question of reduction of large standing armies. The secret of these talks was really well kept: they almost eluded even Acton's attention, and little about them appeared in print until a life of one of the ambassadors concerned—Lord Newton's *Lord Lyons*—was published forty-three years later. Nothing came of them at all. Bismarck no doubt divined that Clarendon's proposals had originated in Paris; he deployed against them arguments, some ludicrous and some evasive, curiously like the arguments for refusing to reduce the German navy put forward by his successors in the years before 1914. He never spoke of his real reason for refusing to treat: he did not trust the French, and so could take no risks. He already

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foresaw that if a French attack was made, and failed, it might be the occasion for completing his version of German unity. Clarendon died of overwork on 27 June, soon after the failure of these talks, at the moment when Europe had most need of him.

Napoleon as usual did not enter with his whole heart into his ministers' projects. In March, while the disarmament talks were still going on in Berlin, he was engaged in military discussions in Paris with an Austrian archduke, intended to put more reality into his triple alliance plans. Daru resigned in April, on a difference with his colleagues on an internal point, and was replaced on 15 May by the duc de Gramont (1819–80), a career diplomat conspicuous for his dislike of Bismarck, whose appointment was evidently intended to show that Napoleon like most monarchs of his day intended to keep control of foreign affairs in his own hands. In June the emperor sent Lebrun, another military confidant, to Vienna, without even telling his ministers that he was doing so; Lebrun got satisfactory assurances of military help from Francis Joseph, except that they were verbal assurances only. Gramont urged on Napoleon the futility of searching for allies in advance: if there was war with Prussia, he said, other powers would come tumbling over each other in their eagerness to join victorious France; or if *per impossibile* France was not victorious, what good could allies do? It was with this counsellor at his elbow that Napoleon approached the final crisis of his reign.

Though he had extended France's south-eastern frontier in 1860, and had tried in vain to extend her north-eastern frontier since July 1866, Napoleon never seems to have directed any covetous glances towards Spain: partly since the Pyrenees form so natural a frontier; partly since his wife was a patriotic Spaniard; partly since he recalled how the invasion of Spain had helped to ruin his uncle. However, it was from this neglected quarter that the crisis in which his empire fell developed.

The reign of Isabella II of Spain had drawn to an animated close in September 1868, when her corrupt despotism broke down under the weight of its own inefficiency and the attack of two military politicians, Serrano and Prim (1814–70). (Prim had commanded the Spanish troops in Mexico, where he had learned no love for France.) Those who seek to find the hidden hand of Bismarck in all the transactions of these years which turned out to France's disadvantage have fancied they can detect him at work here. If Bismarck is credited with venomous foresight over a period of years, this conjecture is a possible one; but there is no evidence of any kind for it, and the weight of probabilities tells against it. Isabella fled to Paris; and her successors at once began search for a monarch to preside over the constitutional regime which they set up. Eyck has drawn an engaging sketch of Prim thumbing over the *Almanach de Gotha* for a prince of the necessary impeccable breeding and Catholic religion;[1] but

[1] E. Eyck, *Bismarck* (Zürich, 1941), vol. II, p. 438.

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the possible choices were few. It was widely recognised at the time, in the press as well as in 'diplomatic circles', that the only probable starters were Isabella's child Alfonso, Ferdinand of Portugal, the dukes of Montpensier, Aosta, and Genoa, and some prince of the Catholic branch of the Hohenzollern family, whose Protestant head was king of Prussia.

From the domestic Spanish point of view there was little to choose between these candidates, save that Alfonso was disliked; but other powers had other views. England might be expected to oppose Montpensier on traditional grounds, for he was Louis Philippe's son. Austria would not look kindly on an Italian, nor France on a German; and France under a Bonaparte would equally oppose Montpensier. For Prussia, the Hohenzollern candidate had an obvious strategic advantage, should he succeed: when the war with France which almost everyone in Berlin took for granted as inevitable broke out, he would compel the French to keep glancing backward over their shoulders: a point somewhat lightly touched on by the many historians who have sought to present this candidature solely as a trick of Bismarck's intended to precipitate the war.

That Bismarck was concerned to promote the Hohenzollern candidature there can now be no doubt, though his motives for taking it up are still not all of them clear. The subject had come to his attention as far back as November 1866;[1] and he took a close interest in the Spanish situation, sending out to Spain in May 1869 two confidential emissaries, Bernhardi and Versen (1833–93), whose eventual task—facilitated by the disposal of over £50,000 in cash—was to accustom the army and the church in Spain to the idea of a Hohenzollern ruler.[2] Strategy apart, there is no need to presume any other motive for his actions, at first, than a desire to cause France the embarrassment either of accepting a Hohenzollern king of Spain, or of undertaking a troublesome diplomatic campaign to prevent this candidate's success. The fact that Prince Leopold of Hohenzollern (1835–1905), on whom Prim's choice came to rest, was more nearly related, through his Murat grandmother, to Napoleon III than to William I was used by Bismarck as an excuse for expressing surprise at French protests at his candidature: the chancellor knew that Hohenzollern family loyalty was entirely engaged on the Prussian side. Leopold's father, Karl Anton, Prussian Prime Minister in 1858, was a personal friend of his distant cousin the king.

Another family connection of importance to Leopold was that he had

[1] This fact, like many others of importance to this subject, was first revealed in R. H. Lord's *The Origins of the War of 1870* (Harvard, 1924), an analysis of part of the German archives. Many of the conclusions proved by Lord from documents were divined thirty years earlier by Acton's historical insight, but Lord seems not to have used Acton's papers; nor were all the German files available to him. Those hidden from him were published by G. Bonnin, *Bismarck and the Hohenzollern candidature for the Spanish throne* (London, 1957). These two books, and vol. XXVIII of the French government's *Origines diplomatiques de la guerre de 1870–1871* (Paris, 1931), which covers the period 1–15 July 1870, are the cardinal printed sources.

[2] Acton MS. 4928, f. 162; Bonnin, appendix A.

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married Ferdinand of Portugal's daughter, so that those in Spain who advocated a united Iberian kingdom could hope that Leopold's children might one day obtain it by succession if Leopold became king of Spain. However, a more direct means to this end would lie in making Ferdinand himself, or his son Luiz the king-regnant of Portugal, king of Spain; and Princess Leopold was most reluctant to stand in their way. It was not until both Ferdinand and Luiz, and one of the Italians, had refused his offers that Prim first made a formal approach to Leopold in September 1869.[1] This approach may possibly have been encouraged from Berlin. In any case, it failed: neither Leopold nor his father liked the look of the Spanish throne, and both feared French opposition. Prim accordingly opened negotiations with the duke of Genoa, then a boy at Harrow; but early in 1870 the duke's uncle, the king of Italy, forbade him to stand. Prim therefore really had no choice but to approach some lesser princeling, which would be repugnant to Spanish pride; or to make Spain a republic, which would be repugnant to Spanish sentiment; or to antagonise France and England at once by an offer to Montpensier; or to turn once more to the Hohenzollerns.

Late in February 1870 Prim's messenger Salazar set off again for Germany, this time with entreaties to Bismarck as well as to the king of Prussia and to Leopold. Prim enjoined extreme secrecy on Leopold, though his previous negotiations had been more or less open: this argues anxiety lest French opposition should be fatal to the scheme, and also may have been encouraged from Berlin, where Bismarck now took up, and pressed most earnestly, the Hohenzollern candidature. In a powerful paper of 9 March he urged on his reluctant monarch the importance of the strategic reasons for control of Spain, and added ingeniously, though not quite fairly, that if no Hohenzollern stood a Bavarian Wittelsbach might succeed, and provide a sure if distant rallying-point for elements hostile to the new Germany Bismarck was constructing.[2]

In the Prussian capital it was pretended by the few people in the know at the time, when they came to be questioned afterwards, that Salazar's visit was a purely family affair. Nevertheless on 15 March William held in his palace a dinner party which was attended by his chancellor, his Minister for War, his chief of staff, and three lesser advisers, besides Karl Anton and Leopold and the king's own heir. Bismarck now with all his colleagues urged on the prince the duty and indeed the necessity of

[1] Late in March 1869 a Spanish diplomat visited Berlin, and was suspected by Benedetti—probably wrongly—of discussing the Hohenzollern candidature then. Benedetti both warned his government of his suspicions and raised the point with Thile (1812–89), Bismarck's deputy at the Prussian foreign office; Thile firmly denied the possibility of the candidature. In May Bismarck lectured Benedetti on the insecurity of the Spanish throne—presumably with his tongue in his cheek, as he had only just sent Bernhardi out there.

[2] This document was carefully hidden, in the 1920's, both from Lord and from the editors of *Die Grosse Politik*. It was first published in 1931, and can now be seen, with the king's honourable and reluctant marginalia, in Bonnin, *op. cit.* pp. 68–73.

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standing; but the king was reluctant to force the young man's hand, and left it to him to decide. Leopold, after a few days' consideration, refused. His father had by now conceived some enthusiasm for being the father of a king, and sent at once for Leopold's surviving younger brother Friedrich (Anton had died of wounds at Königgrätz), but Friedrich also after some delay refused the doubtful honour, and the whole plan was abandoned.

It was revived in an unexpected way, by Versen. This thirty-six-year-old cavalry major disliked the dropping of a scheme on which so much of his time had been spent, and by dexterous management persuaded the Prussian crown prince, Karl Anton, and Bismarck to co-operate—behind the king's back—in begging Leopold to change his mind. Prim of course supported this forlorn hope; Salazar returned once more to Germany; and Leopold at last, on 19 June, wrote to the king of Prussia for formal leave to accept. This leave was wrung from an angry William on the 21st; and two days later still Salazar was able to leave for Madrid with the all-important letter of acceptance.

At this point a curious incident intervened. Salazar sent home a cipher telegram, through Prussian channels, announcing his success, and saying that he would return on 26 June. Through what a secret inquiry later showed to be an error by a cipher clerk at Madrid, the Prussians there passed this date on as 9 July. The change had results that reached far. Madrid was already unbearably hot; and Prim, not wishing to exasperate Parliament by prolonging its sitting for a fortnight for an object he could not yet reveal, prorogued it until October. Salazar, on the move, knew nothing of this, and when he reached Madrid he did not conceal from his friends the news he brought with him. The Catholic Hohenzollerns were hardly more discreet. It is not therefore surprising that on 2 July a rumour of Leopold's acceptance appeared in a Paris newspaper; and Prim that same evening had to make what explanation of the affair he could to an infuriated French ambassador. On Sunday 3 July, the fourth anniversary of Sadowa, the news was all over Paris.

No earlier than the previous Thursday, Ollivier had said in answer to a parliamentary question that his government was in no way disturbed; at no time had the continued peace of Europe seemed more stable to it. English readers will know better the remark made to Granville, the new Foreign Secretary, by the permanent head of the British Foreign Office on 5 July; he had never known so great a lull in foreign affairs. In Prussia, the appearance of calm had been equally complete: Bismarck at Varzin, his remote Pomeranian estate; the queen at Coblenz, the king taking the waters at Ems near by; Benedetti left Berlin on 1 July for a cure at Wildbad, leaving Le Sourd in charge of his embassy. The calm vanished in a flash; within a fortnight, France and Prussia were at war. The curious reader can trace the details of this fortnight's doings, which are sum-

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marised below, in Lord's book and the French documents, and in many books of memoirs, all more or less misleading, in which participants in the conflict have sought to clear their own and blacken their opponents' characters. (No memoirs by Napoleon or by Prim survive.)

The news of Leopold's acceptance was received in France with nervous anger. The Paris newspapers wrote of it in almost unanimous execration, regarding the project as intended to weaken French security and no less rightly protesting, though in the strongest possible terms, at the secrecy in which it had so far been shrouded. In court and government circles there were no two opinions, though the reasons for hostility were sometimes more elaborate. After the disaster, Napoleon said that the insecurity of the Spanish throne had weighed heavily with him, since it seemed to point to Prussian intervention to prop Leopold up against a revolution in a few years' time. (Indeed the next king of Spain ruled for barely two years before his reign dissolved in anarchy.) At the moment, Napoleon agreed with his entourage—a counter-attack must go in at once. This was made the more urgent when the reassembly of the Spanish parliament to elect Leopold formally was, on 7 July, announced for the 20th. But the French opened their campaign in so bad a temper that they made two capital mistakes. One was to direct it exclusively against Prussia. Had the Prussian government merely been asked to use its good offices to discourage Leopold from putting himself forward, and to join in a French protest at Madrid against Prim's choice, it would have been hard indeed for it to refuse. As it was, Le Sourd was sent (4 July) to put a brusque question to Thile, who gave him an even brusquer reply. 'In Berlin', said Ollivier in retrospect, 'they slammed the door in our face, and laughed at us.'[1]

The second mistake was worse. On the afternoon of 6 July Gramont closed a brief reply to a parliamentary question, a reply which asked the Chamber not to press for a debate at so delicate a moment, with this highly coloured passage:

> But we do not believe that respect for a neighbouring people's rights compels us to suffer a foreign power, by putting one of its princes on the throne of Charles V, to disturb the present balance of strength in Europe to our disadvantage (Keen applause from many quarters) and to endanger the interests and the honour of France. (More applause: continuous cheering.) We sincerely hope that this event will not take place. To prevent it, we rely alike on the wisdom of the German, and the friendship of the Spanish peoples. (Friendly interruption.) Should it turn out otherwise, strong in your support, gentlemen, and in the nation's (another friendly interruption), we shall know how to do our duty without wavering or weakness. (Prolonged applause—repeated cheering. Some disturbance and protests on the left.)[2]

[1] *L'Empire libéral*, XIV, 35. It is to be remembered that this volume of Ollivier's apologia did not appear (at Paris) till 1909.

[2] Corps Législatif, 6 July 1870; *Journal Officiel de l'Empire Français*, 7 July, p. 1189, c. 2.

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The delight with which the Assembly received this statement was so great that the sitting had to be suspended for a while; and Ollivier, who had helped to draft it, defended it to the end of his days as an excellent declaration. In fact it was, though popular, disastrous. Not only was its tone objectionable, with its deliberately invidious distinction of Prussia, as near a neighbour as Spain, as a 'foreign power' instead of a 'neighbouring people'; not only was Gramont moving ahead of the evidence available to him, and contradicting the formal denials of Thile, when he accused Prussia of having engineered the plot. His closing words clearly threatened war if his demands were not met. They were fatal. If the further ineptitudes of Gramont's and Napoleon's diplomacy had not a few days later plunged France into war, there would still have been this speech to explain; and as Bismarck more than once remarked in the ensuing week, he was ready to demand an explanation of it so humiliating that France could be relied on to fight instead.

Bismarck, half a day's journey from his capital, had not so far taken a prominent part; though as early as 29 June a telegram from Salazar, with whom he had remained in constant touch, warned him that things were coming to a head. Advantage of his absence was taken by Gramont, who knew that William I, though slow and sometimes obstinate, lacked his chancellor's determination. At the start of the crisis, on the afternoon of 4 July, Gramont and Ollivier saw Werther the Prussian ambassador in Paris—an honest diplomat, ignorant of the inside history of the candidature—and persuaded him to carry to Ems, whither he had long intended to travel on the next night but one, news of the extremely painful impression made on the French government by Leopold's acceptance. They appealed, through Werther, to William's good nature and love of peace, and made it plain that they hoped William would forbid Leopold to go on. Werther, who reached Ems early on 6 July, rather toned down what they had said to him, but at least made clear to the king the tenseness of official nerves in Paris and the widespread talk there of war.

William was sensibly impressed; and that same afternoon—ironically enough, the afternoon of Gramont's irretrievable speech—he wrote to Karl Anton. The king warned his cousin of the degree of French excitement—he enclosed a copy of Werther's report to himself—and put forward various suggestions for appeasement. Leopold, meanwhile, had vanished. Much ink has been wasted on attempts to account for his movements; there seems little doubt that his family told the truth—that he had gone for a walking tour in a remote part of the Austrian Alps, leaving no address, and did not happen to look at a newspaper until 13 July, when of course he left at once for home. So far as he knew when he started on the 1st, his fate would not be decided till October; and he had had recent strain enough to deserve a holiday.

For the greater part of the next week William, worried and confused,

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tried to follow a policy of his own that would succeed in persuading his cousins to withdraw Leopold's name without any sacrifice of the honour of Hohenzollern, either through bad faith to Spain or through an appearance of unseemly concession to the threats of France. Gramont's speech much annoyed him, but Werther's account of the mood in Paris convinced him that there was genuine danger of a war, which he did not himself want to provoke. The junior diplomat Abeken, whom the chancellor had posted with him, constantly urged on him, at Bismarck's distant dictation, an attitude of firmness and a policy of no concessions; but his wife, with whom he was in daily correspondence and who sometimes came over to visit him, urged on him with no less weight the importance of preserving peace. His court officials were most of them more or less bellicose, but he was exposed on the other hand to the good manners and the adroit persuasiveness of Benedetti, who reached Ems late on 8 July—journeying at his own suggestion—with the task of coaxing William into advising Leopold to withdraw, if he could not get him to order the prince to do so.

Other forces were at work in the interests of peace. William himself suggested to Bismarck that an appeal might be made to the good offices of some friendly power, on the lines laid down in the Treaty of Paris; the speed with which Bismarck advised against this helps to show how determined he was to leave the French to fall into the pit they were digging for themselves. Gramont had already appealed to other powers. The tsar disapproved of Leopold's acceptance, but was not inclined to protest at it; he had had a friendly interview with his uncle King William at Ems at the beginning of June, at which nothing seems to have been said of the candidature, and though he thought that Hohenzollern pretensions went rather farther than was courteous to France, it was not at that time a Russian interest to enhance French power against Prussian, and he took no action. Austria did not take any effective measures for the support of either side. Francis Joseph's ambassador in Paris could see too clearly how some of the ruling circles there had determined to force a war on Prussia. As early as 6 July he had found the empress 'strongly in favour of war' and 'ten years younger at the prospect of a political victory or a war'.[1] Beust counselled moderation to Gramont, and sent an envoy specially from Brussels to urge it on him and on Napoleon; but both refused him an interview until too late. In England Gladstone's cabinet was at sixes and sevens over its Irish land policy—a subject that is now known to have come near to destroying it—and so much occupied with domestic matters that it only noticed with reluctance what was happening across the Channel.

For in France from the first the militarists had seized the initiative. Fortified by the almost unanimous support of the press, they urged on the emperor all the advantages of an immediate war. Every year that

[1] Metternich to Beust, 8 July 1870 (from *English Historical Review*, vol. XXXVIII, pp. 92–3).

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passed saw Germany's population rise in relation to France's; every year that passed saw the states of Germany draw closer together in military alliance. Temporarily the French army had the advantage in equipment, for the Chassepot was a better rifle than the needle-gun, and devastating results were expected from a new and fearsome weapon, the *mitrailleuse*, ancestress of the machine guns that were to dominate the battlefields of 1918 (cf. ch. XII, p. 307). The problem that was raised by this apparent superiority was grave. Every reasonable man and woman, in France and Germany alike, would have agreed in 1870 that war, considered by itself, was an evil. Yet a plausible, self-consistent case could be put forward to show that there were worse things than war, that one of those worse things would be the eclipse of French culture by Prussian efficiency, that Bismarck's Prussia had shown by its underhand arrangements with Spain that it was working for such an eclipse, and that therefore it would be treacherous folly for any French statesman to fail to grasp the opportunity which these arrangements had placed in his hand to make use against Prussia of France's temporary and probably transient military predominance. Moreover, not all the spokesmen of militarism in France could at this time be described as reasonable. The 'patriot' sheets urged immediate mobilisation, preparatory to a declaration of war; and though the soldiers did not press matters quite so fast to a conclusion, they took a number of precautionary measures. These did not fail to attract the attention of the north German embassy at Paris, and reports of them started as early as 9 July, when Benedetti's mission had hardly begun.

On the Prussian side there was no need for military precautions. Thile wired to Abeken on the evening of the tenth that an officer 'assured me that on the General Staff *everything is ready*' ('*versicherte mir, dass auf dem Generalstabe* Alles bereit sei'). Moltke and Roon were enjoying a few days at their country houses, resting in the knowledge that every step worth taking—yet—had been taken already. Bismarck of course was much more busy. Not only was he conducting the critical work of his Foreign Office from Varzin, and carrying on constant exchanges by telegram with the king; he was also supervising a campaign of vitriolic intensity in the Prussian newspapers, whose denunciations of France and all things French were matched for venom and ill temper only by the simultaneous onslaughts in the Parisian journals on Prussia and all things Prussian. He was not fully informed, nor promptly, of all the steps that his monarch was taking in daily interviews with Benedetti and in communications by messenger with Karl Anton; but he knew enough to realise that the decisive moment was approaching, when either French or Hohenzollern patience would give way. He left Varzin on 12 July for Ems—a journey necessarily made through Berlin.

He reached the capital that evening. On the way from the station his carriage crossed Gorchakov's; the two chancellors shook hands and

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exchanged a few amiable words. Gorchakov, who was on holiday, retired from the scene. Bismarck went on to his office—and was rudely shaken by what he found there: a telegram from Abeken which told him that Leopold had withdrawn. Other messages with it explained that the withdrawal had been secured, in part at least, by pressure from William on Karl Anton, that William was contemplating announcing it himself to Benedetti, and that feeling in Paris was if possible even more feverishly anti-Prussian than in the previous days. Bismarck cancelled his onward journey, and stayed in Berlin to contemplate how French diplomacy had achieved a resounding success, one that the aged Guizot called the most splendid of his lifetime.

The tactic of working on William in Bismarck's absence had been superb. William, without telling—perhaps without daring to tell—Bismarck what he proposed, had sent Colonel Strantz of the General Staff to Karl Anton, charged with messages that have never been published but of which the purport was made clear by Karl Anton's actions. Moreover, Napoleon had privately arranged with the Spanish ambassador in Paris to send Karl Anton another envoy likely, for family reasons, to be listened to: Strat, the agent in Paris of Karl Anton's son Karl, prince of Roumania. Strat was not only charged with a plea to the old prince to preserve peace by making his son Leopold withdraw his name, but also brought an implied threat, that if he did not, his son Karl's tenure of the throne of Bucharest would be abbreviated by French intrigue. Strat and Strantz both arrived late on 11 July, and talked to Karl Anton far into the night. Ambition for Leopold struggled in the old man's mind with ambition for Karl; a sense of duty to the head of his house with a sense of honour that made him reluctant to withdraw a word once given. In the morning, Karl and duty won; he sent a telegram to Prim, with a copy to the Spanish ambassador in Paris (neither in cipher), renouncing in Leopold's name any claim to the throne of Spain. William was also told, and received the news with simple delight that a wearisome difficulty had been overcome.

The reaction in Paris was different. Of course the renunciation was welcomed; but French opinion was by now so excited that Karl Anton's telegram by itself did not seem enough. Could the father's word even be regarded as binding on the son? Everyone remembered, or was at once reminded, that only six years before another German prince, an Augustenburg claiming the throne of Denmark, had refused to abide by his father's renunciation of it on his behalf; the adventurous journey, as worthy of light opera as of high politics, by which Leopold's own brother had picked his way across enemy territory to his Roumanian crown was even fresher in memory. More weight attached to the diplomatic argument that France had received an insult from Prussia, as well as Spain, through the form in which the candidature had been sprung on her suddenly and secretly, although her diplomats had never left any doubt in the mind of

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anyone who had consulted them that France would never agree to a German king of Spain.

This diplomatic argument was no doubt uppermost in the minds of Gramont and Ollivier when in the early afternoon of 12 July they together saw Werther, who had returned to Paris; though they cannot have forgotten that their own government's tenure was precarious, for the chambers were full of ambitious men ready to pounce on them if they did not present a brutally firm attitude to Prussia. Gramont had only heard of the renunciation a couple of hours before—the post-office authorities sent him a copy of Karl Anton's telegram at the same time as they delivered it to the Spanish ambassador, who called to inform Gramont of it at the beginning of the interview with Werther; Gramont cannot have been acting on mature reflection or with the advice of his emperor. He proposed to Werther that the incident should be closed by a letter of apology to Napoleon III from William I, in which the Prussian king should say that he was sorry for the trouble his cousins had caused and that he was animated by feelings of respectful friendship for France. Werther ruined his own career by undertaking to put this request before his monarch; but the making of it unsettled more than an elderly gentleman's standing in the Prussian diplomatic service. By insisting on getting something more than the renunciation out of Prussia, Gramont brought on war.

Though he acted at first on impulse, carrying with him by personal and social force the agreement of Ollivier—such a provincial lawyer was not inclined to argue with a duke in this atmosphere of crisis and peril—Gramont went out that evening to the palace of St Cloud to report what he had done to Napoleon. He carried into the calm of the suburbs the passions that agitated the centre of Paris, and seems to have had no trouble in convincing the emperor that he had done right. Indeed, the two of them, under Eugénie's influence, decided that a further and equally wounding request should be made of the king of Prussia. At seven o'clock Gramont telegraphed to Benedetti to secure from William an assurance that his permission, as head of the Hohenzollern family, would never again be given to Leopold to put himself forward for the Spanish throne. Gramont renewed this order, in different words, at midnight; but omitted in either telegram to mention to Benedetti his conversation with Werther in the afternoon. He did, however, impress on the ambassador the need for an answer quickly, in order to appease the violence of Parisian feeling. These telegrams, which Ollivier called 'the crazy improvisation [*la folle improvisation*] of St Cloud', were decisive: they destroyed the second empire. Foolish as they were, it took a day for them to achieve their effect: Wednesday, 13 July 1870.

At eight that morning William set out for his usual two hours' constitutional in the park at Ems; a walk interrupted by several exchanges with Benedetti through an aide-de-camp, at the end of which the ambassador

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managed to place himself in the king's path. After a few minutes' talk about the renunciation, of which both had just seen an account in the local newspaper, Benedetti pressed on the king the need for a promise never to let Leopold's name come up again. He did not manage his business as dexterously as usual; William, surprised at the request and rather offended at the urgency of the Corsican's tone, said emphatically that he could never make such a promise, raised his hat, and walked on.

Later in the day he let Benedetti know, through an aide, that he had now heard in writing of the renunciation (Strantz had got back to Ems at midday), and that he approved of it; but to the ambassador's almost frantic appeal for a further interview he returned, in the evening, a firm refusal. This refusal was certainly motivated by the receipt, in the late afternoon, of Werther's dispatch which gave Gramont's demand for a letter of apology: a demand which the king not unnaturally found impertinent, and which, though wrongly, he imagined Benedetti was also charged to put before him.

It is to be noted that Benedetti had not yet received this snub when, soon after luncheon, Abeken wrote the celebrated telegram to Bismarck in which he gave an account, largely in the king's words, of what had happened in the park that morning. This telegram[1] put Benedetti's proposal and William's dealings with him in a rather sterner light than the facts warranted. A possible explanation of its tone might lie in something as simple as the summer afternoon climate of Ems, which can be almost intolerably stuffy. It included a rather unusual final paragraph, giving Bismarck authority to reveal the incident to the press as well as to the Prussian embassies if he so wished.

Bismarck had spent a bad night and a tantalising day in Berlin, without reliable news of how the renunciation had been received at Paris. At about four in the afternoon he saw Lord Augustus Loftus, the slow and solemn British ambassador, to whom he made no secret of his hatred of the French; he went so far as to compare Napoleon's government to a 'band of robbers', in the justified hope that Loftus would repeat the wounding phrase later that day and so help sting the French beyond endurance. For there is no doubt that after hearing of Leopold's withdrawal Bismarck was determined to seize the opportunity of precipitating a war, preferably so that France appeared the aggressor. He hoped that French pride and French folly would find the withdrawal insufficient, and make some fresh demand that would make war certain. Failing that, he was ready to take Prussia over to the offensive, and demand an explanation of Gramont's speech—that fatal speech of a week before—which would achieve the result that by now he ardently desired. He said almost as much to Loftus;

[1] Enciphered by 3.10 p.m.; dispatched 3.50 p.m.; received at Berlin 6.09 p.m. Text in Lord, *Origins of the War of 1870*, pp. 220–1; translation in (for example) C. Grant Robertson, *Bismarck* (London, 1918), pp. 496–7.

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the rest can be inferred from the telegrams he wrote in the following hours, and from the delight with which he used to recount in later years how, that evening, he had bamboozled the French into seeming to bring on the war for which he now longed.

There has never been any secret about Bismarck's desire for war at the end; he was fond of retelling its outbreak as the great triumph of his life. Whether he had desired war all along is not so certain, and his defenders from that charge must make what play they can with his previous retirement to Varzin when he knew the crisis was near explosion point, and his subsequent conduct as the arbiter of European peace. His forcing on of the Hohenzollern candidature in spite of France's known susceptibilities, and his attitude in the closing stages of the crisis, create a strong presumption that war had never been far from his mind; though only an uncannily keen eye for the fleeting opportunity enabled him to secure its outbreak.

Roon and Moltke dined with him that evening. He always used to say that they arrived in low spirits, but in fact the three of them were in good enough heart to telegraph to the king suggesting that an ultimatum be sent to France demanding that she account for her conduct. Meanwhile Abeken's message describing the morning's incidents at Ems was being deciphered. At first Bismarck and his guests were much depressed by it; but they saw possibilities in the permission to publish. Bismarck rapidly drew up a revised draft of the message, much shorter and very much ruder; his companions were delighted with it; and within a couple of hours it was being distributed, free, on the streets of Berlin.[1] It was also telegraphed to the north German representatives at most of the European capitals except Paris.

It reached Paris soon enough. The condensed version made it appear that Benedetti had discourteously pressed an unreasonable demand on William, and had, with equally decided discourtesy, been rebuffed.

Bismarck's condensation has always popularly been taken as the efficient cause of the Franco-Prussian war; but that is only partly true. It provided indeed the necessary state of mind among the inhabitants of each country for making the war popular; the French and the Prussians each felt that they had received an intolerable insult and that satisfaction for it must be sought in arms. But neither France nor Prussia was a democracy, and it is necessary to trace briefly the steps by which the rulers of each hurried what had started as a diplomatic incident to the end that diplomacy is popularly supposed to avert.

The French cabinet spent the afternoon of 14 July in session at the Tuileries, in Napoleon's presence, and arrived at two decisions: to mobi-

[1] Text in Lord, *op. cit.* pp. 231–2; translation in (for example) Grant Robertson, *loc. cit.* The original condensation, in Bismarck's hand, on the decipher from Ems can be seen in PRO:GFM 21/47.

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lise the army reserves, and to appeal to a congress of the powers. It was not until after this meeting that the unhappy Werther was able to see Gramont and explain that he had been instructed to go on leave at once. He so managed his explanation as to make it clear that the Prussian government had disavowed him: this incident heightened Gramont's impression that Prussia was going to stick at nothing. In the evening, among the dense crowds on the boulevards shouting for war as fiercely as the crowds had shouted in Berlin the night before, ministers appreciated that their two decisions were self-contradictory; and they met again at St Cloud after dinner. Napoleon's incapacity to make up his mind continued to dog and depress him, but plenty of people were now ready to make it up for him: above all his wife, who attended the meeting, and passionately urged war. Among many items of bad news, the worst was that Bismarck's version of the Ems telegram was being circulated by Prussian legations abroad. It seemed clear to the French cabinet that Prussia was intent on forcing a war on France: they therefore decided that the country's safety demanded an immediate mobilisation, and that it was best to press ahead and seize such military advantages as could be culled from rapid action. The Minister of War, Lebœuf, assured them that the army was at the peak of preparedness; Gramont practically shouted the emperor down when Napoleon glanced at the idea of a congress. (Mere mention of the word to him by Vitzthum next evening 'threw the duke into an indescribable rage'.[1]) War was determined on, and next morning a final cabinet met to settle details. Napoleon remarked a few days later to an English friend: 'France has slipped out of my hand. I cannot rule unless I lead...I have no choice but to advance at the head of a public opinion which I can neither stem nor check'[2]—a strange echo of the famous utterance, once attributed to Ledru-Rollin, in the troubles of 1848–9.[3]

Benedetti, who had travelled overnight from Ems, saw Gramont and Ollivier just after this cabinet on the morning of the 15th; he gave his account of what had actually passed on the promenade at Ems, and may have mentioned how the king had shaken his hand as he left Ems station, murmuring 'Au revoir à Berlin';[4] his report left the two ministers unshaken in their belief that Prussia desired war. (Benedetti's own accounts stop with his departure from Ems.)

On Friday afternoon, 15 July, Ollivier and Gramont presented to parliament their request for money to cover mobilisation costs, couched in such terms as to amount to a declaration of war. Ollivier carried the lower house with him by the overwhelming majority of 245 votes to ten.

[1] Note by Vitzthum, probably in 1873, quoted in Oncken, *Rheinpolitik Napoleons*, vol. III, p. 443.
[2] To F. C. Lawley, *Daily Telegraph*, 25 July 1870.
[3] 'I am their leader, I have to follow them.'
[4] Acton MS. 4928, f. 180.

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Only Thiers and Favre made effective speeches in opposition; Gambetta spoke with them, but voted for war. A few hours later William, who had spent the day travelling to Berlin, took his own decision to mobilise, after an hour's talk with Bismarck in the train and ten minutes' consideration of inaccurate news from Paris in a crowded waiting-room of the Potsdam station; and passed through dense and cheering crowds to his palace. The formal French declaration of war reached Berlin four days later (19 July 1870).

The only serious attempt by a neutral to avert the war, Granville's appeal to France and Prussia to have recourse to the friendly offices of England, was made too late—late on 14 July—to have the least chance of success: events had moved too fast for any serious notice of it to be taken by either side. Moreover, the British cabinet had been consistently ill-informed; as Acton put it in a note, cruel but true, 'their exhortations, tainted with ignorance of the central transactions of the last five months and not penetrating to the marrow of affairs, carried neither authority nor conviction'.[1]

The immediate origins of the war of 1870 may be traced to short temper and excitement on the part of the peoples and the statesmen of both belligerent nations: insensate bellowings for war in both capitals; the recklessness of Gramont, pitted against the calculation of Bismarck; the protracted irresolution of Napoleon III, and the hasty irresolution of William I.

The course of the war is summarised in another chapter (ch. XII, pp. 325–7). This one may conclude by touching on some of the political events which accompanied the military ones, and indeed were often dictated by them. It was fear of France, for instance, that originally moved the states south of the Main to enter the war on Prussia's side: their governments and peoples felt alike, with an alarm that had sound foundations in memories of the first French empire but was needless viewing the inefficient mobilisation of the second, that French armies would pour across the Rhine and that any decisive battle would be fought on its eastern bank. Prudence seemed to dictate compliance with the legal obligation under which the states lay, under the once secret treaties of August 1866, to put their armies under Prussian command if Prussia were attacked by France; and no patriotic German doubted that she had been.

Napoleon, having failed to bring his allies to the sticking point, paid the penalty. Fear of Russia, whence clear indications were given that Austrian intervention would invite attack—Russia had promised as much to Prussia as far back as March 1868—sufficed to keep Austria-Hungary neutral. Personal assurances of high respect continued to pass between Francis Joseph and Napoleon, but not a cartridge came from Vienna to help the French. Once more France requested Italian aid; once more

[1] Acton MS. 5519.

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Italy named Rome for capital as the price; once more Napoleon refused to pay. By the time the war had gone on for a month it was clear that a French army, even under a Bonaparte commander, was not invincible; and France fought on as she had begun, alone.

England, suspicious for a decade, was especially alienated by the publication of the Benedetti project (see p. 580 above). Under pressure from England, France agreed—late, and making difficulties—to an extra treaty reinforcing the neutrality of Belgium: a treaty to which Prussia gave immediate assent, for the Prussian general staff knew that it would not need to send troops across Belgian territory to bring Napoleon down.

He surrendered at the beginning of September, and his empire fell with him. The temporal power of the pope survived the Second Empire by sixteen days; on 20 September 1870 Italian troops entered Rome.

The regime which succeeded Napoleon in France would have been ready to conclude peace at once, had Bismarck's terms not demanded such harsh retribution for a war for which the Government of National Defence felt it was not responsible. Bismarck insisted, on military advice, on the cession of territory on the eastern frontier of France, which had been in French hands for more than a century; the cession was not one that the new French government felt it could honourably make until it had tried its fortunes in the field. Long afterwards, Bismarck sometimes spoke of the annexation of Alsace and northern Lorraine, which in Woodrow Wilson's words 'unsettled the peace of the world for fifty years', as if he had always disapproved of it. He might have been able to prevent it, but did not wish to do so. He did not merely shelter, at the time, behind arguments that a German frontier on the Vosges was strategically indispensable, or that his elderly and obstinate monarch insisted on some tangible spoils of victory. He devoted all his outstanding diplomatic talent to securing this annexation, and succeeded (preliminaries of Versailles, 26 February, and Treaty of Frankfurt, 10 May 1871). Gladstone worked with righteous but ineffective indignation to arrange a European protest against this proposal, and had to satisfy himself with securing a reduction of the large cash indemnity demanded of beaten France.

Meanwhile Bismarck had been busy in two other fields as well. The Russian denunciation of the clauses in the Treaty of Paris which forbade a Russian Black Sea fleet is discussed elsewhere (see vol. XI, ch. on International Relations). A final word needs to be said here of the settlement of the German question by the establishment of the German second empire.

Military necessity was its mainspring: in July and August, faced as they thought with imminent danger from France, the south German states turned to Prussia for protection; and in the autumn, when Prussian military genius had secured victory after victory, they continued to turn

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to Prussia from a no less human desire, having found themselves on the winning side, to stay there.

Bismarck had felt for many years that a spring tide of popular feeling in Germany would be needed to secure German unity under Prussia; he saw and seized the opportunity that victory provided. But he knew the kind of unity he wanted, and took great care not to let popular feeling get out of hand. Apart from the one fatal error of excess on France's eastern frontier, he limited the territory of the new state to what Prussia could conveniently digest; he settled, in fact, for a *kleindeutsch* (small German) state, and never desired to bring into it either Austria itself or any of the millions of Germans in the Austro-Hungarian or Russian empires.

Moreover, Bismarck limited the newly made Germany constitutionally as well as territorially. At Versailles, where the Prussian headquarters were by then established, he worked in the autumn of 1870 with the representatives of Baden, Bavaria, Hesse and Württemberg—separately, not in conference—on the framework of a German empire. The existing constitution of the North German Confederation was used, and the changes were for the most part verbal—even the extensive concessions that appeared to be made to Bavaria either were made on matters of no real importance, or never in later practice left the plane of formality. It was still possible for Prussia, alone, to forbid any constitutional change. The administration was still strong *vis-à-vis* the parliament, and the federal authority *vis-à-vis* the component states; the armed services were still directly under the monarch, and virtually not subject at all to parliamentary control; the chief of the civil executive, the imperial chancellor (*Reichskanzler*)—Bismarck himself, of course—was still 'responsible' (*verantwortlich*), and with a pregnant full stop the new constitution like the old did not say to whom. No concessions to the public were made, save in the creation of a 'Germany'.

Bismarck succeeded perfectly; but the final struggle was painful. It centred round the person and title of the monarch. William I, a patriotic Prussian all through, born in a royal house and thoroughly used to being a king, did not want to be an emperor, least of all with the title of 'German Emperor' (*Deutscher Kaiser*), and not 'Emperor of Germany' (*Kaiser von Deutschland*), which Bismarck insisted he should take—both because it had a more popular ring, and because it did not imply territorial sovereignty, and so spared the feelings of the subordinate rulers. As usual, William gave way to Bismarck in the end; but it called for one more effort of Bismarckian industry and intrigue to get for him the necessary letter of invitation from the senior of the other German ruling houses, the Wittelsbach king of Bavaria. A more popular form of invitation would have been abhorrent to Bismarck and to all the rulers concerned. Ludwig II, who was only 25, despised the Hohenzollerns as parvenus,

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and had no desire to place himself under a Hohenzollern emperor. But he was not much interested in politics: architecture and music—he was Wagner's patron—were his two avowable passions, and he was already showing signs of the madness that led him fifteen years later to suicide in the Starnberger See. He had already begun the series of gigantic castles of the romantic decadence which have made his permanent mark on his kingdom; and in the fastness of Hohenschwangau he was persuaded by his court chamberlain, Holnstein, to copy out and sign a suitable letter to William which Bismarck had drafted himself. Holnstein used two arguments on him: one political, that the new monarchy was to be elective, 'Hoh[enzollern] today, Wittelsbach tomorrow';[1] the other, more potent, material. For the rest of his life Ludwig received an additional £15,000 a year, provided by Bismarck out of the funds of Ludwig's former ally George of Hanover. This made further extravagances of castle-building feasible, and postponed for a decade Ludwig's financial catastrophe. Holnstein took 10 per cent.

In this inelegant fashion the German empire was founded. It was proclaimed on the 170th birthday of the kingdom of Prussia, 18 January 1871, at a spot which was to figure in German history again forty-eight years later: the Galerie des Glaces in the palace of Versailles.

[1] Acton MS. 5387, f. 33.

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